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ABSTRACT

Recommendations from the first annual Utah Small Schools Conference resulted in several specific actions. After studying certification requirements to determine if greater flexibility could be attained to remedy some of the restrictive rules that burdened small schools, the Utah State Board made it possible to move administrators and supervisors from one position to another, and allowed these people to administer programs at any level and to teach at the level previously certificated. The Board also adopted standards which combined most special education certificates. After reviewing the system of funding to determine if it provided equal opportunity in small schools an unsuccessful attempt was made to radically change the funding system: a lawsuit is being considered in order to determine equity and equality in Utah's finance formula. In order to provide technical aid to small schools on the "how to's" of community involvement, the State Office staff developed several models of community involvement that apply to small school settings. Efforts are underway to help identify and develop model small schools and programs to give rural educators a realistic idea of programs and practices that work. For future planning small school educators should consider the emerging urban to rural migration and its possible effects on their schools. (AN)

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SMALL SCHOOLS

Walter Talbot, Commissioner of Education
Utah State Department of Education

It is good to be with you this morning to talk about a subject dear to my own heart: the Small School. Last year as I addressed this conference I asked for some specific movements to make small schools better in Utah. Hopefully you have been earnestly engaged in that process in the interim and as you meet for the next two days you can point with pride to significant developments as a result of your individual and collective efforts.

An advisory committee on improving small schools has been functioning for two years. Initially there was considerable enthusiasm exhibited by that committee and the goals it adopted were on target for small school improvement. I repeat them here for illumination and to urge your support:

(1) Make available to all students the curriculum, programs, equipment, materials, and facilities necessary to provide the varied experiences that will enable students to enjoy an equal opportunity for a quality education.

(2) Make maximum use of school and community resources at the local, regional, and state level to broaden the curriculum of small schools, increase educational opportunities, and thereby better meet the needs of individual students in all areas of academic and social growth.

(3) Develop greater community involvement and support for the purpose of bringing about a closer working relationship between the home, the school, and the community.

(4) Develop strong preservice and inservice education programs that will produce competent teachers and administrators who can function well personally and professionally living and working in rural communities.

All of the elements for quality education in small schools, or elsewhere for that matter, are mentioned in those four goals: (1) equal opportunity, (2) maximum use of school and community resources to meet the needs of individual students, (3) home and community involvement, (4) competent teachers who can function personally and professionally in rural communities. Those are lofty goals and they are appropriate.

Someone said recently that in order for goals to be appropriate they need to be conceivable, believable, achievable, controllable, measurable, but not optional. I feel the goals just stated meet all those criteria. However, it

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is up to you as to whether or not they find fertile ground. Of particular importance is the matter of not making them optional. They need to be mandatory and every effort needs to be made to achieve them.

Concurrent with those goals of the Committee are the goals of this Conference.

(1) To provide resources and materials for the improvement of small schools.

(2) To stimulate participants to look for new and better ways to improve small schools.

(3) To build awareness of the issues and challenges and ways to address them.

(4) To add strength to one another through the formation of an association of those responsible for small schools.

(5) To provide you an opportunity to interact and to share ideas and opinions.

This is the second annual conference on small schools. One of the goals you set for yourselves last year was to hold an annual conference. That is at least one recommendation which came from the conference last year that has been implemented. Are there more? What has each of us done to follow up on what we said needed to be done last year?

I went through the Post Conference Report recently to try to get a fix on what you said you wanted done. Some things have been implemented. Others have been tried and were not successful, but that does not mean we will give up trying. Going back to the report, let me check off some significant recommendations made last year.

(1) Study certification requirements to see if greater flexibility can be attained to remedy some of the restrictive rules that place a particularly difficult burden on small schools.

We've done some things. In May, the State Board adopted the Administrative/Supervisory Endorsement which combined the certificate for administrators and the one for supervisors. You are free to move administrators and supervisors from one position to another. In addition, the certificate qualifies its holders to administer programs at any level and to teach on the level previously certificated. I think we need to broaden that to teaching at any level as well. Also in May, the Board adopted standards for special education which combine most special education certificates. One, the special education resource endorsement, permits the holder to teach at any level those mildly and

moderately handicapped students with intellectual or emotional handicaps or learning disabilities; the other, the severely handicapped endorsement, permits teaching at any level in the intellectually or emotional handicaps and learning disabilities areas. Teachers of students with communication disorders, and deaf and blind students are still required to have special certificates.

(2) Review the present system of funding to see if it provides equal opportunity in small schools.

We attempted to radically change the funding for small schools, beginning with the premise that small schools need more money. We didn't succeed but that does not mean we'll never try again.

We have also gone on record of equalizing capital outlay in an effort to provide better funding to all schools, but we notice a disproportionate number of small schools that need it most. In meeting in a small school recently, and noting the greatly inadequate school facilities, the Board asked that we study the feasibility and desirability of suing the state to see if there is equity and equality in the finance formula, particularly capital outlay.

(3) Provide technical assistance to small schools on the "how to's" of community involvement.

The State Office staff has developed several models of community involvement that are applicable in small school settings. In fact, one of the original and most successful community involvement models was developed in a district which has nothing but small schools.

(4) Identify and develop model small schools and programs to give rural educators a realistic idea of programs and practices that work.

Two efforts are going forward on model schools. On the one hand we are looking for and have developed the criteria on a model elementary school, middle school, and high school. One of those should be a small school. We are also trying to develop a productivity model school and some small schools are leading contenders for such designation. The differences between the two models are: in the model school one particular philosophy and instruction strategy will be used so that everything that goes on in that school will conform to that philosophy and instruction pattern; in the productivity model we want programs that will either continue present achievement levels and practices at a more economical price, or improve student achievement at the current cost.

That is not to say that there are not now existing any model small schools. Indeed there are and they ought to be emulated, visited, and modeled.

Last year, you may recall, that I challenged you to do at least two things: (1) greatly increase student instruction time. I commented that I seriously question that students are receiving 100 hours of instruction a year in the subjects they take in school. This disruption of instruction time and the scheduling of activities which I believe have no place in the school program are seriously cutting into the formal instruction program. (2) Focus on one thing that each small school can do well--where it can become the model. Every school ought to be noted for excellence in at least one area. I would prefer that prominence to be in an academic or career preparation program--where every student that comes through that program would be distinguished as one who has been through it.

(5) Provide preservice training and field experiences in small schools that will better prepare teachers to live and work in small school communities.

I'm not sure we're any further ahead on that matter than we were a year ago but the recommendation of last year recognized a three-year program to achieve the goal, so we still have time. But I did notice that Terrence Hatch will be conducting a mini-workshop at this conference on "Utah State University Teacher Training for Rural Schools" so I think that that is moving ahead also. I also know that the problem is on the mind of Ivan Muse for he contributed an article to the official PTA organ, PTA Today, mentioning last year's conference and the recommendations.

Several other recommendations dealt with flexibility and individual education programs. I am not going to cite any specific recommendation but I am going to give you a challenge to do something about flexibility. A couple of months ago, the State Board met with local boards and superintendents in a typical third Thursday evening session to discuss goals of the system of public education and to permit boards and superintendents to raise issues that the State Board may help solve. The cry came that the State Board and State Office ought to do something about the inflexibility of program regulations. After several comments from district personnel, I stated that the State Board had provided far more flexibility than districts were willing to utilize. I would

like to illustrate what I meant by that:

(1) Under the new graduation requirements districts may waive any specific requirement in meeting the individual needs of students. (2) There are at least 12 ways listed in the standards document in granting credit beyond traditional classroom instruction, and in the introduction to that nontraditional listing it says that the following are examples. (3) Districts are encouraged to provide a work or service experience for high school students one semester out of the last six but for those who don't or won't a third option is given to offer a career exploration program consisting of at least five courses. (4) School may be held any 180 days during the fiscal period, except for Sunday. (5) The language is such that districts may provide any program they want in order to meet individual needs so long as districts will maintain sponsorship of that program and give attention and care and protection to students in the same manner as they would if students were in attendance at school. (6) Finally, the whole program of studies requires an individual education plan for each student, agreed to by the student, parent(s) and school official(s).

My only concern is that we may have become so flexible that we have lowered the standards; but, when I contemplate the differences among students and schools I am forced to believe that the only standard that matters, after all, is the standard applied to individuals. But my point is that indeed districts are not burdened by the inflexibility of state regulations. My own perception is that districts are burdened only by their unwillingness to provide the same flexibility to schools and to students that they want the state to give to them. That perception comes from a great deal of observation and experience and from a statement made by a member of a local board of education in the meeting I mentioned, after I had explained the flexibility just enumerated. She said, "That's great, but don't tell the students."

A short time ago, I was in a school of 65 students in kindergarten through grade 10 with four teachers. The teachers were discussing the program for next year and had it neatly charted in a typical class schedule arrangement. They had assessed the desires of students and had created several classes to meet what the students wanted. But the teachers were regimented into time periods for each class and students were distributed according to grade levels and courses. I suggested that the school be run without a class schedule, without bells to divide the time, and without specific courses; that the school be organized around the needs, interests, abilities, and aspirations of the students and operated on an individual plan basis. The teachers were anxious

about meeting state requirements insofar as course offerings and graduation standards are concerned. My feeling was and is that the organization and structure could come later and should not interfere with the education of students. Organize the program around the kids, I suggested, then construct transcripts of credits or permanent records translating what the kids have learned into courses and credits. If ever that could be done, it was possible in that school. But teachers and schools are hidebound by their experiences and traditions and generally lack the creativity to move out of the mold. For small schools block scheduling is infinitely better than class scheduling and individual student-scheduling is better than block scheduling.

If we could catch the vision of the inherent strengths of smallness in the schools we represent and then do all we can to capitalize upon those strengths our small schools would be the lighthouse schools. But the response in most small schools is to organize using the big school as the model. When that happens students in small schools are straight-jacketed and there is far more rigidity in the program than in the larger school, when the reverse should be true.

Creative and concerned teachers and administrators can make a difference in the education of students. Those in small schools must build into programs multiple opportunities for students to have experiences that go beyond the textbook and stretch those students as they have never been stretched before. It just does not make any sense to talk about the inherent strengths of smallness and then act as if they didn't exist. It makes no difference in the lives of kids to admit that they can achieve with the best and then give them no opportunity and no requirement to do so. In the small school the teacher can interact more frequently with each student and come to know the real potential and the special needs. That fuller knowledge ought to count for something and make a difference in what the student can and should do.

We are often guilty of claiming the benefits of small town living and then teaching students as if their only wise course was to desert their hometown. That has the effect of convincing those who choose not to leave that they may have made the wrong choice. There is a trend, you know, of moving from the urban setting to the rural setting, reversing the flight to the city. People are moving back not only where the air is more pure but where life with others outside the family can be more personal and family and community membership can be cultivated. Good education will build on the strengths of those factors. The trend of moving to the city has been broken, I believe. Over the years I

have observed that about half of the districts in Utah gained population each year while the other half lost. This year 30 districts gained population and only 10 lost and the most rapidly growing districts are not urban. You in small districts may be in danger of losing the thing you ought to cherish most--the opportunity for individualizing your programs, of capitalizing on the inherent strengths of smallness, of using the community and the natural resources around you in your instruction programs. As you grow larger I hope you'll operate your big schools on a wise and prudent small school model.

Last year in my speech to you, I mentioned the matter of self-esteem and talked about the devastating effect of a negative attitude about small schools. I explained that one of the biggest problems I had to battle in the kids I taught in a small school was the feeling that a mediocre performance was "pretty good for us." I want to tell you that inherently there is no reason for a rural-inferiority/urban-superiority feeling. Individually, kids from small towns and small schools are every bit as bright, as capable, as worthy, as kids from big cities and big schools. But they will not achieve, or if they do it will be an exception, if they have low self-esteem, a poor self-concept, and low expectations of achievement. You have to do something about that. The most important factor in a learning environment is that the student achieve an unshakable conviction of self-worth. Teachers can help by regarding students highly, by realistic and high expectations of performance, and by a love affair with the school and community.

Our policies and administration and teaching patterns tend to be myopic insofar as the small school is concerned. We ignore the strengths we say are there; we fail to exploit local resources to their fullest; we believe that the only help available to small schools is that from the outside.

I refer again to the Post Conference Report of last year's conference on small schools. Of the nine conference resolutions every one fixes responsibility on the outside and none fixes responsibility on local boards and administration and teachers and students, and parents and communities. The litany goes like this: Five of the nine say that the State Education Agency should take responsibility; two indicate that the State Advisory Committee should have the responsibility; one gives responsibility to teacher training institutions; and one asks the state, which probably means the State Office of Education, to develop model small schools and programs to give rural educators a realistic idea of programs and practices that work.

In the format of the report the recommendations were listed in columnar fashion telling how they were to be implemented, who was to do it, and when they were to be completed. Of the 32 specific things to be done, either the State Board of Education or the SEA staff was listed first as having the responsibility. In only 15--less than half--were superintendents named as having any responsibility. Thirteen listed regional service centers as having secondary responsibility. Ten, less than one-third, indicated principals had any responsibility. Seven had lay citizens assuming some responsibility. Teachers were given responsibility in only five recommendations. In only one were local boards considered as having any responsibility. Teacher training institutions were given secondary responsibility for 14 of the recommendations; junior colleges had minor responsibility for one.

That points to a real paradox. The expectation and demand for local control is stronger in districts where small schools are operated than in any place in the state. Resentment of state rules and control is strongest there. Yet the attitude seems to be we can't do anything for ourselves because we're small, because we're poor, because independently we don't count for much, because what we're doing is overburdening our taxpayers and it still isn't enough.

Of course, I'm generalizing and in some respects I'm overstating the case for effect. But for the most part, I'm concerned with an attitude of defeatism from a segment of society which has always been the backbone of the nation, with a dependence emanating from those who have been, historically, most independent. I am also realistic enough to understand that you need help; but I know that no one is in a better position to help you than you are. In fact, your schools are not going to be better than they will become from your own toil, and inspiration, and perspiration. I've not lost my faith in you and what you represent but I guess it is evident that I'm losing my patience.

I hope that as you conclude this conference two things will happen: (1) each of you will go home resolved to improve your own schools on the resources you have; (2) that the discussions you have and the report you make will reflect what you are going to do, first, and what others are to do, secondarily, to support you.

Now, in closing, I hope I have not been unfair. It is a custom of rural people to discipline hardest those they love the most. I've not meant to hurt or to harm but to challenge. I recognize that for the most part I've not used positive reinforcement, although if you will look past those prickly statements you'll find much support for you and for small schools. Also if you will examine my record you'll find continuous support and hope for small schools.

Good luck to you and thanks.